

The Next Voting Rights Landmark: The Voter Empowerment Act of 2012

By Rep. Steny H. Hoyer (MD-5)

Throughout our history, the most fundamental safeguard of liberty, equality and opportunity has always been the right to vote. Whenever that right was denied, Americans banded together to demand full inclusion in our democracy, from the rousing addresses of Maryland's own Frederick Douglass to the marches for women's suffrage, culminating with the Freedom Rides of the 1960s. Today, with a pivotal election just six months away, the right to vote is once again under threat from Republican-controlled state legislatures seeking to restrict access to the ballot.

To counter that threat, and because every voice deserves to be heard this November, last week I introduced the Voter Empowerment Act along with Rep. John Lewis — a hero of the Selma March for Voting Rights in 1965 — and other members. This legislation will improve our voting system in three key areas: access, integrity and accountability.

The Voter Empowerment Act will improve access by modernizing our voter registration system, making it easier for deployed military personnel and Americans with disabilities to vote, and expanding opportunities for early voting. It protects the integrity of the process by making sure every vote is counted, prohibiting election officials from purging voter rolls, and instituting new safeguards against voter fraud. Our bill ensures accountability by setting high standards for voting machines and creating a national hotline to report problems at the polls on Election Day.

The Voter Empowerment Act has been designed to facilitate and encourage voting and make the process easier. In America, we ought to be making it less burdensome to vote, not more. This is in sharp contrast to the recent state laws restricting access to the ballot, which include limitations on conducting voter registration drives, the elimination of same-day registration, and a reduction in opportunities to vote early.

While proponents have claimed that these measures are intended to crack down on widespread

voter fraud, scant evidence of any such fraud exists. Instead of protecting our voting system, these measures will have the effect of making it more difficult for many eligible voters, especially minorities and young people, to cast their ballots and have those votes counted. Here in Maryland, I am proud that we have a voting system that makes access a priority, with nearly two weeks of early voting and an emphasis on providing students, seniors, military personnel, and those with disabilities with ample opportunity to register and vote.

According to the Brennan Center for Justice, one third of African Americans and nearly a quarter of Latinos relied on early voting to participate in the 2008 election, many traveling to their polling places after church on the Sunday before Election Day. With these new rules, however, those who cannot take off work to vote on a Tuesday will be faced with a new hurdle that may prevent some from voting altogether.

Our nation's greatest strength is the principle of one person, one vote. Democrats are committed to standing up for this principle, and I am proud to be joining John Lewis and others in Congress in calling for the Voter Empowerment Act to be passed into law. We must ensure that every American's voice is heard this November, because the outcome of the 2012 election will determine whether we can continue to recover our economy and create opportunities for our people to find jobs, send their kids to school, afford health care, and save for retirement.

Frederick Douglass, in an appeal to expand voting rights to former slaves, wrote: "It is plain that, if the right belongs to any, it belongs to all."

Though 155 years have passed since Douglass penned those words, they continue to ring true and underscore the basic argument for the equal right to vote for all Americans. Because a vote is much more than a lever pulled or a hole punched – it is a means to preserving the opportunities we all seek and the protections every individual deserves. We must continue the fight to protect that right and continue working to make our voting system the fairest, most secure, and most inclusive in the world.